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ABSTRACT

This study examined the continuation and duration of related services provided for children transitioning from early childhood special education (ECSE) to the school-age setting (i.e., kindergarten) particularly the post-ECSE special education services provided. Data provided by 69 educators (administrators and special education coordinators) in Missouri were analyzed and included individualized education program (IEP) data on 235 former ECSE students, focus group interviews with parents, and a survey of administrators. Among 10 major findings are the following: school-age IEPs provided approximately the same number of minutes of related services as did ECSE IEPs, although the distribution of services did change; the related service considered by survey respondents to have the greatest impact on education improvement was speech and language therapy; and parents believe there is less communication with program personnel once children transition to the school-age setting. Recommendations address: (1) ongoing examination of differences as children move from ECSE to school-age special education programs; (2) adapting the survey to collect perceptual data that examine differences among administrators, teachers, and parents regarding services provided; (3) examining barriers that may foster a belief among parents that ECSE and school-age special education are different; and (4) collecting data regarding methods of information distribution to parents utilized by each program. (DB)

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Missouri Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) Evaluation 2001-2002

A Study of

ECSE IEP Services

vs.

Post-ECSE IEP Services

Conducted by
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College of Education
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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In 1986, Public Law 94-142 was amended to include children three to five years of age. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) has been further amended which includes the provision of Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) under part B. The Division of Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), has provided a framework of best practices, which clearly differentiates the instructional settings for children with disabilities.

Prior to the passage of P.L. 94-142 in 1975, the provision of related services to children with disabilities was based solely on assessment of therapists and therapy was carried out outside of the classroom in separate rooms (Szabo, 2000). With the passage of P.L. 94-142 and subsequent amendments, federal special education legislation has provided for the inclusion of related services for children with disabilities where the use of these services was determined to be needed.

Even though related services are a part of many IEPs and programs developed for children with disabilities, the how, when, and frequency of their delivery varies. Services may be delivered by direct or indirect methods, in or out of the student's classroom (Szabo, 2000). The amount of services delivered to students is dictated by the IEP which is based on assessment information and student's needs.

As children move from early childhood special education programs to school-aged programs, reviewing what occurs with the delivery of related services including duration and frequency of such services is important. Very limited research on related services has been completed over the last decade. Generalized research findings can be summarized to include the following:

- parents often think more therapy is better;
- at the beginning of services, many parents think pull out services are better but the prefer integrated models (McWilliam, 1996);
- teachers who work closely with therapists contributed more to IEP development (Dunn, 1990).

Theoretical perspective underlying early intervention for this population originates with Head Start and the efficacy of the long-term educational benefit from providing extensive early intervention to children who are at risk. Children entitled to Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) services receive education and related services specified in an individualized education program (IEP). Once children reach school age, programmatic changes also occur as part of the individualized education program (IEP). Parents have advocated for the continued provision of services originating in ECSE based on the belief that these services continue to be necessary in order for their child to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Administrators, teachers, and parents are concerned that key related services are not terminated based on a change in placement; rather, the termination of services such as speech/language services are made based on the measurable success of the intervention. Assessment data, which show how the provision of specific related services facilitated a developmental need, is paramount to this change of programming.

INTRODUCTION

Due to administrator, teacher, and parent concerns regarding the continuation and duration of related services provided for children transitioning from ECSE to the school-age setting (i.e. Kindergarten), the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Division of Special Education contracted with the Southwest Missouri State University's Institute for School Improvement to conduct a pilot study of ECSE program services vs. Post-ECSE Special Education program services. The research team completed a pilot study during fall 2001. Revisions to the methods utilized in the pilot were made based on suggestions from the MO DESE and the statewide study began November 2002.

This research report presents analyses of data provided by 69 educators (i.e. administrators and special education coordinators) across the state of Missouri. Educators also provided IEP data for 235 students who received ECSE services and currently receive Special Education services within the school setting (i.e. Kindergarten students). These data were utilized to examine the differences that may occur in related services children receive as they transition from the ECSE environment to school setting (i.e. Kindergarten) programs. In addition, this report also contains the analyses of focus group interviews conducted with parents throughout Missouri in order to provide qualitative data regarding the additional perceptions / perspectives of the differences that may exist between the two programs.

METHODS

Design

Data were obtained via IEP review, survey questionnaire (administrator level), and focus group interviews. A meeting was held between Missouri DESE Division of Special Education personnel and SMSU / ISI project investigators in October 2001. During this meeting, MO DESE personnel suggested the IEP data form and administrator survey questionnaire could be more easily accessed by ECSE administrators / coordinators statewide through mass email. The initial email was distributed in November 2001 with a return date of December 15, 2001. In order to increase the return rate, a second email was distributed after December 15, 2001 with a return date of January 25, 2002. Surveys were received during the months of January, February and March 2002; therefore, data analyses began March 31, 2002, to include the maximum number of responses. All respondent data were entered into SPSS PC+ for statistical analyses.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Data Form:

A total of 235 Individualized Education Plan (IEP) data forms were received from 70 Missouri school districts. These IEP review forms represented both Kindergarten Special Education services provided for students in kindergarten as well as the services provided for these same students while participating in these districts' ECSE programs. The IEP data form used by ECSE administrators to review ECSE and Kindergarten IEPs was developed in collaboration with Missouri DESE Division of Special Education personnel. The purpose of the IEP data collection instrument was to determine if differences in services between the two programs exist.

Administrator Survey Questionnaire:

DESE personnel developed an administrator survey that was used in this study. The direction provided by DESE personnel during this phase of the study yielded an instrument designed to collect very specific information from administrators of special programs related to ECSE and how services may change as young children with identified disabilities move into k-12 special education programs. The purpose of the administrator questionnaire was to gauge the perceptual data of Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) administrators from approximately 312 districts located throughout Missouri. The sample of school districts was provided by the Division of Special Education, Missouri DESE. Sixty-nine survey questionnaires were received from the 312 school districts; yielding a return rate of 22.1%. The intent of this method of data collection was to aggregate data defining administrators' perceptions regarding differences between ECSE and Kindergarten special education services, family participation, and funding for ECSE students that enter kindergarten within their respective districts. All respondent data were entered into SPSS C+ for statistical analyses. Demographic data were analyzed by comparing frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations.

Parent/Guardian Focus Group Interview:

The SMSU / ISI research team conducted a total of three focus group interviews between August 7, 2001, and April 18, 2002 with parents and guardians of students who have received or are receiving services from both the Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) program and the school-age (i.e. Kindergarten) Special Education program. The purpose of the focus groups was to gather perceptual data from parents/guardians regarding perceived differences between the two programs. Each focus group followed a semi-structured protocol consisting of five questions with follow-up questions based on participant responses. The focus group protocol was designed by the Principal Investigator in collaboration with the research team. Focus group interviews were approximately sixty minutes in length, with sessions tape recorded while facilitators made field notes.

MAJOR FINDINGS

- Marginal differences were noted regarding the IEP data provided for the number of minutes related services provided while students are in ECSE and school-age (i.e. Kindergarten) program, with school-age IEPs noting fewer minutes in physical therapy services and social work.

- Data indicate an overall, average increase in minutes on school-age (i.e. Kindergarten) special education IEPs for speech and language services provided for students.

- School-age IEPs also included more than twice the number minutes for services classified as "other," which include: applied behavior analysis, adaptive physical education, behavior management, Braille instruction, cross categorical, itinerant services, music therapy, nutrition therapy, orientation/mobility, regular education modification, resource room, and vision, than did ECSE IEPs.

- The majority of ECSE administrators/coordinators (68.2%) believe ECSE IEPs contain approximately the "same" number of minutes in special education related services when compared to Kindergarten IEPs.

- However, opinions among ECSE administrators/coordinators are more varied regarding their perceptions of the number of total minutes contained in IEPs for special education in general with regard to the two programs (i.e. ECSE / Kindergarten).

- While related services such as occupational therapy, speech/language and physical therapy were each noted by ECSE administrators/coordinators to impact the educational improvement of students, the related service considered by survey respondents to have the greatest impact on education improvement was speech and language therapy.

- While approximately two-thirds of ECSE administrators/coordinators surveyed believe unlimited funding would result in "about the same" number of related services and overall special education services provided for students, approximately one-third indicated unlimited funding would result in "some more" services.

- According to ECSE administrator/coordinators, little differences in noted in parental participation during IEP meetings among ECSE and school-age (i.e. Kindergarten) programs. However, these same administrators indicate a higher percentage of parents associated with ECSE programs (40.5%) actively participate in IEPs meetings by asking and answering questions than the percent of parents associated with school-age program (32.9%).

- Parents participating in focus group interviews stated they believe differences exist in communication with/among program personnel. While communication was considered adequate with regard to the ECSE program, parents believe there is less communication once children transition to the school-age setting.
- Focus group interview participants indicated they were also concerned with regard to the social context (i.e. school setting, classroom setting, interactions with peers, etc.) in which services were provided as student transition from ECSE program to the school-age environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Provide for the examination of differences that may exist as children between First Steps, ECSE and school-age special education programs with regard to related services provided.

(2) Adapt the survey questionnaire to allow for the collection of perceptual data that might examine any differences among administrators, teachers and parents regarding services provided. Survey methods that incorporate more coherent questionnaire techniques would allow for more sophisticated methods of data analyses and could address validity and reliability issues .

(3) Examine common barriers that might exist in school-age special education programs that may foster a belief among parents that services among ECSE and school-age special education are different.

(4) Collect data regarding the methods of information distribution to parents utilized among each of the programs.

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